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Mindful Aging

Mindful Aging

The retirement years are often called the golden years with good reason. In late adulthood, there are many new experiences to look forward to: retirement from work, spending more time with family and friends or travelling the world. It is normal to feel a whole range of emotions during this time, including feelings of happiness, excitement, satisfaction and also apprehension, fear and anxiety. These are all normal feelings during this life transition.

Aging is a natural process and everyone experiences aging differently. Your body will experience aging at a different rate than your friend or spouse. While you can't stop the aging process, you can take steps to be healthy. One of the ways you can ward off the negative effects of aging is to protect your physical and mental health.

Mental health is important throughout your life, and it's especially important during this time of transition. Resiliency is key to mental health. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from setbacks and cope with adversity. In other words, it's the ability to react positively and adapt well to change. *So how do you live a resilient life?*

Maintain a positive attitude: There will be inevitable changes to your body and to your emotions. Having a positive attitude, one that embraces and looks for the opportunities in change, will make this transition go more smoothly.

Plan for the future: Your life experiences and choices play an integral part in preparing for this phase of your life. Reflect on your life experiences. Continue to strive for your life goals, like travelling somewhere you've always wanted to go, or starting an activity you've always been interested in. Make a plan. Write it down. Check your plan periodically to monitor your progress and adjust it to build in new ideas and plans over time.

Stay flexible: To live is *to experience, to grow, to adapt,* and *to change* over time. Mental flexibility is the ability to be open to new experiences and new perspectives. Try new ways to solve problems. You might decide to give up some things or ideas in order to live well in new ways. For example, you might occasionally trade driving your own car for using a taxi or riding the bus.

Try some new coping skills: You probably have developed many skills to cope with stress, difficult situations, or conflicts. Some coping skills may no longer be as effective or healthy for you as they once were. Consider trying some new techniques to manage stress – take a course on managing conflict, or try yoga or meditation.

Ask for help: People who are highly resilient are also very good at asking for help. Don't be afraid to get help from friends, family and mental health professionals, especially if you notice negative changes in your mood, self-confidence, sleep patterns or concentration abilities.

Changing places

The first year of retirement was nothing like what Judy*, 57, had expected. She'd gone from being a busy school administrator, managing 23 teachers and 7 support staff to sitting at home with the dogs while her husband golfed with his friends.

"The first four months were difficult. I went from 100 miles an hour to zero, all in the space of a day! I didn't know what to do with myself," she said.

After just a few months away from work, she already missed it. Work had not only been her livelihood, it had also been her passion.

"I felt like a huge piece of me was missing," Judy says. "I loved being a principal. I was used to having people look to me for advice and guidance. In my retirement, it seemed like people stopped asking me for my opinion. That was really hard to get used to."

It was also difficult to see her husband thriving in his retirement. "Ed loved having more time for his hobbies, like golfing and woodworking. He couldn't understand why I wasn't living it up!"

At the urging of her husband, she decided to use her former work skills in a volunteer setting. "A position came open at my granddaughter's daycare. They needed someone to help with organization and planning. Naturally, I was interested! I took on the role in a volunteer capacity and I love it."

Judy also found she was missing her old colleagues and friends. She contacted a former colleague and they scheduled a lunch together. "It was so much fun that we've decided to do it once a month," she said. "It's nice to hear what's going on at the school since I left. It also gives me a chance to mentor my former colleague."

Her advice to people who are in this transition period in their life is: "Don't give up on your passions. There are so many ways to put your life experience and skills to use. You just have to be creative and open to change."

Aging With Grace

While it's impossible to stop the aging process, there are many ways to slow down the process and protect your health. **The key to keeping healthy is to stay active – mentally and physically.**

Stay physically active – This is important at any age, but as a senior, staying physically active will help you keep your independence, improve physical and mental health, increase energy and self-esteem, promote relaxation and reduce stress. Physical activity can include walking, gardening, playing with your grandchildren, dancing, fishing or stretching. Just find something you like to do and be sure to consult with a physician or health professional before beginning any new physical activity program.

Maintain proper nutrition – Nutritional deficiencies and imbalances are more common in older adults. Older adults require less food but more nutrients. Get advice from health professionals such as a nutritionist or dietitian to help with meal planning and budgeting for food.

Exercise your mind – Continue to pursue interests like crossword puzzles, reading, and painting; or find new interests and learn new skills, like exploring the Internet and learning to use email to stay in touch with friends and family. Continue to learn and develop new skills. It will be good for your mental health and well-being, and can help delay or prevent the onset of mental health ailments like dementia.

Stay connected to community and support systems – Staying connected offers you a way to maintain existing relationships and develop new ones. Staying connected within the community through activities like volunteering will help to combat the isolation that can occur when roles change, people move to be closer to family, spouses and friends pass away, and physical or mental ailments begin to affect quality of life. Stay involved in your community of friends and family.

Strive for Quality of life – Quality of life (well-being) is different for everyone and affected by psychological and physical factors. Changes occurring with age may affect your quality of life, so strive to get the most out of life for as long as possible. Enjoy your good health and well-being while you have it, for as long as you have it!

Prevention and Early Detection – Because change is inevitable, maintaining good health through regular visits to your doctor is important. Stay on top of changes that are different from what you have experienced before, and get advice and support from family, friends and health professionals if changes in physical and mental health start to occur. It is often hard to discuss, understand or accept changes that may be occurring, but prevention and early detection are important to helping maintain independence for as long as possible.

Take time to prepare – As you age, and depending on your health, you should make your own decisions about your future wishes. Take the opportunity to prepare for financial, emotional, mental and physical changes while you can. Be sure to tell your loved ones your wishes for the future. This is key to preserving your independence.

Take time to reflect – Life offers moments when we can look back on choices we made, and the directions we chose to go. Not all of our choices were positive, but they all contribute to who we are. Self-reflection offers us the ability to think about and analyze our journey and why things occurred the way they did. It can be therapeutic and it can help us attain better self understanding.

Have an attitude of hope – To hope is to believe situations can or will work out, no matter the circumstances. Hope is important to understanding the meaning and purpose of life. Having hope also impacts how we view events and experiences. It is an understanding that things can be okay no matter the outcome, even if it may seem otherwise. Hope is a powerful tool, it fosters resiliency and coping skills through life's transitions.

Consider yourself a part of the bigger picture – Realizing that we are a small part of a big picture helps us move from self-centered existence to a universal-focused existence. It is a spiritual concept that takes personal effort, a willingness to change, and acknowledges our personal journey to self-discovery. Both the good and bad in our life experiences can positively impact our growth and development as human beings. When we create meaning from experiences, we create the ability within ourselves to survive and rise above difficult situations.

Nurture your passion – Maintaining your passion for life is very important, particularly in late adulthood. Continuing a passion-filled life means you are embracing the experience of aging! Passion for life is about waking up each day ready to embrace what the day holds, even if it may be difficult.

Continue to find meaning in your life – Everyone feels the need to contribute and have a purpose in life. Though life changes with age, it does not mean you have less to offer to society. Continue to find meaning and purpose in your life by contributing to and staying connected to your community, family and friends as much as possible.

How I Learned to be Positive

Carol*, 62, had just come back from a walk with her dog when she got the phone call that would change her life. "My doctor's office called with the test results and it turns out I had cancer," she says.

The following weeks proved to be overwhelming, with a hectic schedule of doctor's appointments and planning for blood work and chemotherapy sessions, Carol was exhausted and sicker than she thought possible when one of the nurses at the hospital made a comment to Carol that would change her life.

"She was prepping me for the chemo when she asked how I was doing. I complained to her that I was tired, I was always nauseous, my family wasn't coping well and on and on. Well, she looked at me with a sympathetic smile and simply said, 'But you're alive'. And I thought, 'Yeah, that's right. I am alive!' I decided to stop wasting my time feeling sorry for myself."

The nurse's comment also caused Carol to reminisce. With the ever-present knowledge that each day was a precious gift, she considered the many times she'd overcome obstacles in her life.

She thought about how difficult it was for her and her husband when she miscarried their first child and how joyful and excited they were when their next three children were born healthy. She remembered how her friends and family rallied around her when she and her husband divorced. She thought of all the days she trained for her 10 km run and how proud she was when she achieved her goal. Remembering these times helped her through the cancer treatments. "I figured that if I could survive all those times in my life, I could get through this, too," she said.

"Sometimes it helps to remember all the times in your life that you've succeeded. Bad times are like dark clouds – they will pass. I kept reminding myself of this and it helped me through."

Mental Illness and Aging

Just as your body ages physically, so too, will your mind. In late adulthood, certain mental illnesses may become more prevalent than they were previously. Depression, anxiety, dementia and delirium are common, and treatable mental illnesses for seniors. It's important to recognize the signs of mental illness and have them treated early.

Depression

Everyone feels sad and down sometimes and it is perfectly normal when you experience a loss or a setback. Generally, feeling sad does not mean you are depressed. But when those feelings occur most of the time, affect your daily function and quality of life, and last longer than two consecutive weeks, you may be experiencing depression. Clinical depression usually results from physical, psychological and social factors. People with depression are not weak in character and cannot simply will themselves out of it. **It is best to seek professional help.**

Feelings:
- Intense sadness that does not go away
- Loss of interest in things that used to be enjoyable
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling helpless

Behaviour:
- Crying easily and often
- Avoiding friends and family
- Not keeping up personal appearance (disheveled)
- Neglecting responsibilities

Physical:
- Low energy
- Walking and talking very slowly
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating too much or too little

Thoughts:
- Less confidence or low self-esteem
- More trouble then usual making decisions
- Inability to stop excessive negative thinking and ruminations
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Anxiety

Anxiety is brought on in situations where tension, uncertainty or fear exist. Anxiety is often triggered by a traumatic event and is also linked to heredity, stress or illness.

Everyone experiences bouts of anxiety from time to time, and in fact, some anxiety is healthy. Anxiety is the "fight or flight" mechanism that allows us to respond to danger. However, if it becomes too intense, lasts for long periods of time and crops up in situations where danger does not exist to the point where it interferes with day-to-day activities, it can become problematic and **a health professional should be consulted.**

Physical:
- rapid heart rate
- shortness of breath
- dizziness
- sweating
- headaches and neck aches
- dry mouth
- nausea or diarrhea
- restlessness
- tremors or shakiness
- sleep disturbance
- vivid dreams

Behavioural:
- avoidance
- distress in social situations
- repetitive or unwelcome thoughts and behaviour

Feelings:
- nervous
- on edge
- worried
- irritability

Thoughts:
- excessive fear or worry
- racing thoughts
- difficulty concentrating
- memory loss
- irritability

Life-Long Mental Illness

Aging presents a different set of challenges to those who suffer with life-long mental illness like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or a developmental disability. Reactions to medications change, social and support systems become fewer, there is an increased risk of chronic disease and financial difficulties can arise. Often spouses or parents were primary caregivers but this role may be passed on to children or community services. Regularly consulting with your doctor will ensure continued success managing your mental illness.

Other Conditions

Dementia and Delirium

Dementias, like Alzheimer's disease and delirium, can develop as we age, and are more prevalent in late adulthood. Signs of memory loss, confusion, disorientation, personality changes and losses in abilities are signs of possible dementia. If you suspect that changes in your mental health and your thinking patterns could be early signs of dementia or delirium it **is important to contact a health professional** who will be able to provide insight, direction and guidance in dealing with these changes.

A sudden change that appears as fluctuating confusion, inattention, and/or changes in communication and abilities may indicate a delirium. Older adults are more susceptible to delirium and it can be caused by a number of medical problem such as infections, poor response to medications, dehydration, elevated blood sugars, etc.

For both dementia and delirium it is vital to have a **health professional assess for other contributing causes.**

Substance Abuse and Addictions

In seniors, common events such as death of a spouse, disability of a spouse, divorce, retirement or other life changes can cause people to abuse alcohol or medication. Abuse or misuse of drugs and alcohol is detrimental to physical and mental health. It contributes to the development of chronic disease, other health problems and directly impacts independence. Substance abuse is often hard to diagnose in older adults, and is often misdiagnosed as mental illness like depression.

Addictions, like gambling, can become problems in later adulthood. Sometimes, a past time that was recreational in nature can become a habit. This can then become problematic and addictive. Consequences can include loss of income and poor health. The most common reasons seniors gamble are to combat loneliness or boredom, to socialize, because they need money or to find a place to "escape".

What to do if you think you have a Mental Health Problem

The conditions mentioned above are often difficult to diagnose, but there are specific tests that doctors can use to determine the exact cause of your signs and symptoms. It is important to consult with a health professional if you think these or anything else may be causing physical or mental illness in yourself or a loved one.

There are many public health programs and associations that provide information and services for those with depression or anxiety who are developing dementia or delirium, or battling substance abuse or addiction. Please refer to the resources section of this document for links and contact information.

Dealing with Addiction

Two years ago, Michael's* mother passed away, leaving his father Don* behind. The family decided it would be best for him to move in with Michael and his family.

One morning, Michael received a disturbing phone call at work. "My wife called me and told me that Dad's credit card company had just called. It turns out he'd maxed out his card and they were calling to let him know he couldn't use it anymore."

They confronted Don about the call that night and asked him to explain the situation. "At first, he denied even having the credit card. We argued and argued. A few days later he finally admitted where he'd been spending his money – playing video lottery games. That's when we knew he was in trouble."

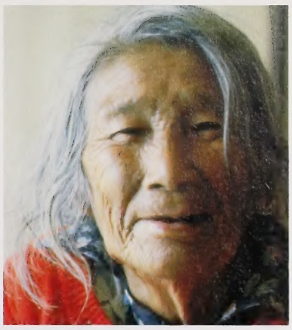
Don went to a debt counselor to rectify the gambling debts. The counsellor also suggested he seek help for his addictions problem. "This surprised all of us, as we'd never considered him an addict," Michael said. "But she was right, he's addicted to gambling."

The physician diagnosed Don with depression and prescribed a daily anti-depressant and addictions counseling. Within weeks of starting the treatment, Don felt emotionally and physically better. The aches and pains he had been experiencing eased, which surprised him. He'd always assumed the pains were a part of aging or his knee surgery, but it turns out his depression had made these symptoms worse.

Though his financial health is very poor, Don's physical and emotional health are steadily increasing. Without the burden of his gambling Don felt great relief that his secret was out in the open.

"It was like a burden was lifted off his shoulders," Michael said. "He was finally able to participate as a family member without any guilt or remorse for hiding his gambling. One night he told us the reason he was always playing those lottery games was because he was lonely and going to the bars helped ease his loneliness. That helped us realize that we need to spend more time with Dad to meet that need for him."

Programs, Services and Resources



There are many programs, services and resources that exist within your community or region that can provide you with information and help. Below is a list of resources that may be of assistance in helping you or a loved one cope or access information about available help, programs and services.

Government

Government of Canada seniors services web portal:
http://www.seniors.gc.ca

Government of Alberta seniors services web portal:
http://www.seniors.gov.ab.ca/

Government of Alberta Dependant Adults Act and Personal Directives Act information
Justice Information Line:
780-427-2745
http://justice.gov.ab.ca/home/

Alberta Health Services/ Alberta Mental Health Board
www.amhb.ab.ca

Alberta Seniors Information Line
Toll-free in Alberta
1-800-642-3853

Healthlink Alberta
1-866-408-LINK
www.healthlinkalberta.ca

Mental Health Help Line
Available 24 hours a day,
7 days a week for information and referral
1-877-303-2642

AADAC Help Line
Available 24 hours a day
1-866-332-2322
www.aadac.com

National Associations

Local chapters of national associations that support your family member's condition, which may have information or services to support caregivers:

Alzheimer Society of Alberta and NWT
Toll-free: 1-888-233-0332
www.alzheimer.ab.ca

ALS Society of Alberta/NWT
1-888-309-1111
www.alsab.ca

Canadian Cancer Society – Alberta/NWT
1-800-661-2262
www.cancer.ca

Canadian Coalition for Senior's Mental Health
416-785-2500 ext. 6331
www.ccsmh.ca

Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association
1-877-203-4636

Canadian Mental Health Association Alberta Division
780-482-6576
www.alberta.cmha.ca

Heart & Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & NU
403-264-5549
www.heartandstroke.ab.ca

Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada
1-800-268-7582
www.mssociety.ca/alberta

Parkinson Society of Canada
780-482-8993
www.parkinsonalberta.ca

Schizophrenia Society of Canada
(800) 661-4644
www.schizophrenia.ab.ca

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* names have been changed

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